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*H.R. 2103 Provides Strategy for U.S. Government to Reduce World's Number of Child Brides*

**Washington, DC** - Today, Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) urged all Members to pass the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act* (H.R. 2103). Congresswoman McCollum is the sponsor of the companion child marriage prevention legislation in the U.S. House (H.R. 2103). This legislation proposes a multi-year strategy for the U.S. government to address the prevalence of child marriage in the developing world and promote the empowerment of young girls. H.R. 2103 fights child marriage by advocating for educational, health, economic, social, and legal programs for young girls.

The House's current consideration of H.R. 2103 comes immediately after the Senate unanimously passed the bill on December 1, 2010.

The *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act* has already received nationwide support from organizations and individuals, including humanitarian Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Congresswoman McCollum issued the following statement on the floor of the House of Representatives.

"Every year, in the world's poorest countries, millions of girls are forced into marriage. Girls - as young as age 8, but often 13, 14, 15 years old - are sold by impoverished parents to settle debts or they are given away to become wives of men who are years or even decades older.

"For a young girl - a child - to be forced to marry an adult man can only be described as a life of slavery, child molestation, and servitude. This is not marriage. It is a violation of the most basic human rights of a child.

"On the floor today is H.R. 2103 - the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child*

*Marriage Act* - a bill that was passed unanimously in the U.S. Senate. Let me repeat, this bill passed unanimously - every Republican and every Democrat - in the Senate.

"I want to commend Senators Richard Durban and Olympia Snowe, along with the other bipartisan co-sponsors, for their tremendous efforts to protect vulnerable girls.

"It is my honor to be the sponsor of the companion bill in the House. And, I want to thank my Republican colleagues, Mr. Crenshaw, Mr. LaTourette, Mr. Schock, and Mr. Latham for their bipartisan support for ending child marriage.

"According to UNICEF child marriage is 'the most prevalent form of sexual abuse and exploitation of girls.' One in seven girls in the developing world is forced into marriage before age 15 - million of girls every year.

"A thirteen year old girl that is forced into marriage will not go to school. She is almost guaranteed to be a victim of domestic violence and condemned to a lifetime of poverty. She is more likely to die or be disabled in childbirth. And, because she is a child, her infant is more likely to die.

"HIV infection, maternal death, child death, gender based violence, and extreme poverty are all deadly obstacles to development that destroy families, weaken communities, and destabilize countries. Child marriage contributes to all of these destructive problems.

"The photo I have with me was taken by a brilliant photojournalist - Stephanie Sinclair - who documented child marriage in Afghanistan. The eleven-year old girl in this photo - Ghulam - is not seated with her grandfather. The man next to this child is her husband-to-be. This little girl's father gave Ghulam to be married because he is too poor to care for her. Ghulam's value to her husband comes from her ability to work in the fields, care for animals, and because she's a virgin.

"In this country, a man treating an eleven year old as his wife would be imprisoned as a sexual

predator, a pedophile. In Afghanistan an eleven year old's abuser is her husband. It doesn't matter where in this world, an 11 year old girl should never be anyone's wife.

"Today we have an opportunity to put the lives of vulnerable girls ahead of the all too common partisan political games that take place in this House. Today we can show our constituents and the world that the life of every girl has value and limitless potential if they can grow up free from exploitation.

"It is my firm belief that girls - girls everywhere - in America, in Ethiopia, or in Afghanistan deserve the right to enter adulthood with the freedom to decide for themselves who their husbands will be. A girl is not a commodity to be traded. She is a precious member of a community who needs to be valued and allowed to grow into adulthood.

"This Congress and the American people spend billions of tax payer dollars on foreign assistance. The U.S. has a direct interest and an opportunity to ensure that girls in the developing world can grow up to be healthy, productive, contributing members of their communities and their countries.

"Not only do girls deserve the right to choose their future husband, they deserve the opportunity to get an education and contribute their skills and talents to develop their countries.

"This legislation supports and expands the successful models already in place for promoting girls education, protecting the human rights of girls, and eliminating the practice of child marriage. This bill authorizes existing State Department funds to be used to implement a strategy to protect girls from forced marriage. This bill does not spend one additional dollar that is not already appropriated by Congress for health, education, democracy, or other development activities.

"Earlier this week I was honored to receive a letter from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa urging House passage of H.R. 2103.

"Archbishop Tutu's letter said, 'Child marriage is a harmful practice that treats young girls as

property, stops their education and robs them of their childhood and dignity.'

"The Archbishop goes on to write, 'Thank you for your attention and dedication to passing this bill before Congress adjourns. By doing so, you may help make the difference between lives of opportunity or enslavement for millions of girls.'

"Child marriage is sanctioned sexual abuse that destroys girls' lives. The choice before this Congress is to do nothing as young girls, children, continue to be enslaved, raped, and condemned to a life of abuse and poverty. Or, we can join the U.S. Senate and vote to pass H.R. 2103 and have the United States stand with millions of girls - today and tomorrow - who seek nothing more than the freedom, the opportunity, and the time be allowed to be children and grow into adulthood without being forced into marriage.

"I thank Chairman Berman for his support, and I urge my all my colleagues to vote to protect millions of girls from sexual abuse."

*Congresswoman Betty McCollum serves on the House Appropriations and Budget Committees.*

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